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THE FALLACY OF THE "CLOSED SHOP"

By GEORGE H. ELLIS,
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In taking up the question of the settlement of industrial disputes I shall, as would be expected, approach it from the standpoint of the employer; and as some at least of our teachers of economics hold that perhaps a difference must be made as between trades employing skilled and those employing unskilled labor, I shall treat it principally as it appears to me as an employer of labor of the highest skill in connection with a union reputed to be one of the best organized in the country, and with its allied trades.

There are but two ways of settling a labor dispute—by some form of arbitration or by a strike.

As a first requisite to the settlement without a strike must come the elimination of the "closed shop." This cannot continue to be a subject for arbitration. You are all familiar with the claim of many labor leaders that the advocate of the "open shop" is simply an enemy of the union, determined on its destruction. I deny this most emphatically. It is the claim only of him who wishes to establish a monopoly in his particular line to the detriment of the general public.

Where would this boasted "land of the free" be to-day had the theory of the "closed shop" been imported by our forefathers. Was not the early settlement of this country itself a protest against the "closed shop" in religion? Has the blood of which we have been so proud deteriorated until we are ready to consider our labor, whether of head or hands, or both, merely a commodity to be bought and sold like the labor of so many oxen? And yet the president of a prominent skilled labor union has said in my presence that he hoped to see the time when labor would be so organized that any employer wanting additional help would send to the union headquarters for so many hours of labor as he would send to the grocers for so many pounds of sugar.

The inevitable tendency of the union when in control is to stifle ambition. We once had in our employ a prominent member of the union who made it his boast among his fellow-employees that he had got "beating down to a science." You may say that this is not the purpose or intent of the union, but I assert without fear of successful contradiction that this, or restricted output, which is akin to it, is one of the results of its control, and I need only appeal to a large number of employers who have recently changed from a "closed" to an "open shop" basis for full proof of this assertion.

The unionist says the "closed shop" so called is in reality the "open shop" in that the only thing necessary is for a man to join the union to obtain work—only necessary to join the union! Do you know what this means? Do you know the obligation to which every man who joins the Typographical Union must subscribe? It is in part as follows:

"That my fidelity to the union and my duty to the members thereof shall in no sense be interfered with by any allegiance that I may now or hereafter owe to any other organization, social, political or religious, secret or otherwise."

We are told this oath does not mean what it says. Let us see. In the cross-examination of a witness (a member of the Typographical Union) a short time since in one of our courts in Massachusetts the witness was asked, referring to the obligation I have just read, if "that obligation purports to go beyond obligation to church and State," to which he replied, "I think so." I have personal knowledge of perjury committed in an injunction suit in our own city by members of the same union and presumably on the same ground.

Is it to be supposed that employers will continue to put the management of one of the most vital parts of their business entirely into the hands of the members of such an organization? For this is what the "closed shop" does.

The plea that the "closed shop" is necessary to the existence of the union, or, as the president of an international union puts it, "a foundation principle of trade unionism is that we have the right to strike an office to compel its employees to join our union," is in itself a recognition of the fact that it is founded on force, and that not only is force necessary in its dealings with the employers, but it

is as necessary to compel loyalty of its own membership. This whole proposition is so un-American that I do not need to dwell upon it. When its real significance is understood, as it is now being understood, enlightened public sentiment will not stand for it, and the "closed shop" with all it implies will become a thing of the past.

What then will take its place? That depends on the attitude of the unions themselves. If there is enough of enlightenment in their membership to reorganize them on an "open shop" basis they can continue to do business. If not, the employers will ignore them altogether until the better element withdraws from them and itself organizes on a new basis.

The reorganization is not as difficult as might seem. The agreement between the International Printing Pressmen and Assistants' Union and the United Typothetæ of America is much along the line proposed and has proved the fallacy of the claim for the "closed shop" that membership must be compulsory, in that while it constitutes, in the words of the president of that union, a "closed shop" agreement, as far as wages, hours and shop practices are concerned, it is an "open shop" agreement so far as membership is concerned.

One of its provisions is that the union "shall not engage in any strike, sympathetic or otherwise, or boycott, unless the employer fails to live up to this contract, it being understood that the employer fulfils all the terms of this contract by paying the scale of wages and living up to the shop practices as settled by the committee, regardless of his employees' union affiliations; no employer shall engage in any lock-out unless the union or members thereof fail to live up to this contract; the conference or arbitration committee to be the final judge of what constitutes a failure to live up to this contract."

It provides the manner of arbitration and for the withdrawal of all aid or support by either organization from any employer or local union refusing to accept the decision of the Board of Arbitration. This agreement, first proposed in 1902, was entered into in March, 1903, to continue in force until May 1, 1907. What has been the result?

In the past four years the membership in that union has increased more than sixty per cent., and if this increase has not

been because of the agreement, then it certainly has been in spite of it; in either case, so far as one experiment can do, it has destroyed the argument that you cannot have union membership without the "closed shop."

I should not in this connection do justice to the officers and members of the Pressmen's Union if I did not pay my tribute to the manner in which they have fulfilled their part of the agreement, notwithstanding the fact that the past few months have seen as severe a strain put upon both parties to the agreement as can ever come. Differences have arisen, but they have rarely reached the point of dispute, and there has been little difficulty in settling them.

Some two or three years ago, I think before the existence of the international agreement, I was asked by the president of a local Typographical Union when a demand for an increase was under discussion why it was that the Pressmen's Union never seemed to have any trouble in securing what they asked for, though wages were higher than those of the members of the Typographical Union. My answer was that it was largely due to the attitude of the Pressmen's Union in approaching the question.

Now, isn't here a large part of the difficulty in settling industrial disputes? Isn't it the attitude with which either or both parties approach the matter?

In the Typographical Union the "closed shop" principle presupposes (or did until recently) the power to carry any demand into execution, and this had a large influence on the attitude of its officers when making the demand, while the employers, chafing under the conditions, were themselves not in a "receptive mood."

We are told that the power to enforce a demand is necessary to the success of a union. This I do not believe. Make your union so attractive to the workers in a trade that all the best men in it will become voluntary members, and no other force or power is necessary. Self-interest on the part of employers will compel compliance with any reasonable request, and a union thus constituted will make no other.